

As Long as I'm Doing It

by James O. Tate

The Shape of a Man: A Novella and Five Stories

by Randall Ivey

Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc.;
121 pp., \$10.95

The Mutilation Gypsy and Other Stories

by Randall Ivey

Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc.;
157 pp., \$13.95



Writing—literary creation in the fullness of the sense that we have known it in the previous century and even in the one before, from the French and Russian masters, the daft Irish, the mad Yankees, the haunted Southerners (and from elsewhere, of course)—sometimes seems to be on the way out. Senses of language, of irony, of place, of reality, appear to have been dulled or even eradicated by education and cable television. Contemplation does not square with institutionalized victimology, nor does listening jibe with noise. Or, as a thoughtful man put it the other day, “American literature is over.” “It’s not over,” I replied. “Maybe it’s just that Americans aren’t writing it any more. I can’t remember what Edward Said said, but Yogi Berra said, ‘It’s not over till it’s over.’”

From what I can perceive from these collections of short fiction, there is a certain identifiable quality that emanates. *The Shape of a Man* includes the story “Laissez Faire Redux,” in which the first thing that springs to mind today when you say “South Carolina” is treated fictionally and dramatically and humorously, not politically or ideologically. The question of flying the flag, or which flag, is resolved in a demonstration of the shared Southern culture known to both races in their familiar history, music, and flag—a point easily understood by those who know a culture from the inside and baffling to ideologues who do not. That is much, but even better is the first paragraph: “It was a mistake to get cable television, just like it was a mistake to get a brother-in-law, because when you put the two of them together, there is no peace for me.” Such a sense of voice tells us that we will

hear a story, not a diatribe.

The next story in that volume is set in Manhattan, as a man tells a story about how his perception of a socialite changed. And the next is narrated by a woman of a certain age, the fourth by a younger one, as both confront erotic challenges. The novella, “The Shape of Man,” a gothic tale of violence, is set in the 1950’s. The last story, in the third person, concerns a woman who memorializes her son, dead in World War II. In short, we see from Randall Ivey various angles of attack: different decades, classes, sexes, and tonalities. Ivey seems to be attracted to obsessed personalities, and he adjusts his language effortlessly to whatever the requirement might be.

The stories in *The Mutilation Gypsy* are even more varied. Two ghost stories, “Son” and “The Book and the Computer,” are so different from each other in diction, tone, and conception that we would be hard-pressed to know that they were written by the same author. “The Present Unpleasantness” is a satirical treatment of contemporary South Carolina that has little in common with either the experimental “Sunset” or the fable “Appassionata.” The title story recurs to the realm of the Southern grotesque and the traditional subject of growing up through experience. As a collection, *The Mutilation Gypsy* shows that Ivey can do just about anything and that he finds inspiration all around.

This author has declared that his work has a center, that it derives, even in variety, from an identifiable location.

Most of these stories . . . are grounded in very familiar environs, the South Carolina upcountry, where I have lived, save for my college years, practically all my life. Early on I set out as my life’s work the depiction of my fellow upper Carolinians in a cycle of short stories and novels set in the apocryphal Compton County, a cotton mill town of my own imagining, populated by mill hands and farmers and bankers and preachers and politicians both honest and suspect and academics and illiterates and poets manqué and renegade movie directors and transplanted Yankees and scalawags of all sorts and young folks striving to get out of their home country or remaining and trying to make sense of it and old folks who have not yet set-

tled down to enjoy their twilight years but are still pursuing life with fierce appetites.

Ivey’s declaration makes sense as an introduction to his work and also as a response to the experience of it.

Randall Ivey, who professes writing and literature at the University of South Carolina at Union, has, in all probability, developed views on the state of writing today. Even so, his practice is itself quite a statement about the craft and the possibilities of writing—one that says, among other things, “It’s not over.” Randall Ivey is among those few so possessed by vision and word and voice that he might say with Flannery O’Connor’s Hazel Motes, “They ain’t quit doing it as long as I’m doing it.”

James O. Tate is a professor of English at Dowling College on Long Island.

Worrying the Southern Bone

by Katherine Dalton

Minding the South

by John Shelton Reed

Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press; 291 pp., \$9.00



Longtime readers of *Chronicles* are familiar with John Shelton Reed, who used to write a column for this magazine. Those less familiar may recall the occasional news story based on the latest intelligence-gathering done by the University of North Carolina’s Center for the Study of Southern Culture, which Professor Reed founded. Well-known among his fellow Southern sociologists, he has had several brushes with wider fame as the man behind the concept of Death cigarettes (which either were, or nearly were, nationally marketed) and the author of the keynote essay for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics’ official program, explaining the South to foreigners. Over the course of a full career, most of it spent at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, John Shelton Reed has published widely—from monographs to collections of his *Chronicles* column. This book apparently collects everything else—book

reviews, essays, addresses, the odd interview and movie review—and fans of Professor Reed will enjoy it very much.

As it is heavy on book reviews, this collection may be regarded as an interestingly eclectic, heavily annotated, and necessarily brief booklist of three decades' worth of Southern reading, ranging from Norman Yetman's *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* (which Reed reviewed in 1973) to works by Mel Bradford and C. Vann Woodward, and thence diverging to Florence King, Tony Horowitz, and John Connally. Though, as a reviewer, John Reed has made it his standard practice to be either kind or silent, included here is one damning review (of the error-ridden *The South* by B.C. Hall and C.T. Wood), which illustrates why knowledgeable and responsible reviewers must occasionally sharpen their hatchets. Reviewing is so prone to either fatuous praise or sophomoric invective that it is refreshing to see how a polite yet justifiably skewering review ought to be done.

It is something, I think, to be able to boast that the author of *Roll, Jordan, Roll* once lived above your garage. (Eugene Genovese's 1995 collection *The Southern Front* Reed reviews here.) Reed has a good appreciation of Louisa McCord, a South Carolina writer and polemicist who had a remarkable career before and during the War Between the States and who deserves to be much better remembered than she is. Though this book is not as full of amusing oddities as some of Reed's other collections are, it has its share of them; and everywhere you will find displays of Reed's good humor and wit, which must have made him a stand-out at all those sociological meetings and which transfer nicely to the printed page.

There are several personal pieces added as well, in which we learn about his mixed ancestry (he had a Yankee mother), his love for the Episcopal Church, and his roots in Republican Tennessee, which explain most fully, perhaps, his tenacious allegiance to the G.O.P. We also hear about his road to Southern studies, a winding path that led him through MIT and Columbia. For his Columbia dis-

sertation, the young Reed reanalyzed 30 years' worth of Gallup poll data that he expected would show the disappearance of regional differences in Dixie as the South urbanized. What he found, however, was the opposite—the South was holding on to her own ways and opinions as hard as ever—and his explanation for why that was gave him the clue to an understanding of Southernness that has shaped, he says, much of his career.

In myriad ways, with its 45 pieces published over 30 years, *Minding the South* raises the questions that John Reed has been mulling all his life. As he puts it in his essay on *Confederates in the Attic*: "What does it mean to be 'Southern'—if, indeed, it means anything these days? Is there one 'Southern heritage' or many? Who gets to decide what that phrase means?" Finally, he adds, "How are we going to deal with a past that, like most people's, is a mixture of triumph and tragedy, grandeur and squalor, oppression and accomplishment?" John Shelton Reed seems to think that you cannot read too much, or ask too many questions, or love the admirable too much, or laugh too long at the absurd. It is a method well worthy of its subject.

Katherine Dalton writes from
New Castle, Kentucky.

A Stand-up Guy

by Janet Scott Barlow

My Prison Without Bars
by Pete Rose, with Rick Hill
New York: Rodale Press;
288 pp., \$24.95

What is Pete Rose's explanation for failing to remember, throughout his life, his mother's birthday? "I just can't seem to concentrate on things I'm not interested in."

Ever since the news broke that Pete Rose was ready, after 14 years of lies, to admit what most people already believed—that, yes, he did bet on baseball—the sports world, and territories beyond, have been obsessed with the story. The fullness of Rose's confession can be found in his new book, *My Prison Without Bars* (written with Rick Hill). The book begins with Rose's desire to clear

things up before heading off for "the big dirt-nap"; and it ends with his resolution to leave his pre-nap future in the hands of "the big Umpire in the sky."

As for what Rose has to say in the intervening pages . . . well, where to start? The book is one huge detonation of denial, blame-shifting, contradiction, and defensiveness, not to mention screaming ego, utter obtuseness, colossal—even awesome—self-absorption, and total macho b.s. It is shocking without being engaging, hilarious without being funny, and believable without possessing the slightest hint of emotional truth. To experience 322 pages of Pete Rose's personality is to be in the presence of a man whose mind is inside out: Everything is positioned directly opposite its proper place. To endure the logic of *My Prison Without Bars* is to understand anew the meaning of the phrase *beside the point*. Rose's idea of being a stand-up guy: "Throughout my life, if I did something wrong, whether it was making an error [on the field] or cheating on my wife—I took responsibility." Rose's explanation for avidly spending 40 years' worth of free time losing money at racetracks: "I reckon you might call me 'a creature of habit.'" Rose's reasoning as to why, even now, as he seeks reinstatement in Major League Baseball, he will not stop gambling: "Hell, nobody said I had to become a monk!" And oh, what a task now faces the big Umpire in the sky. One imagines him staring blankly at the celestial walls and muttering, "Sinners I can handle. But boneheads . . ."

Pete Rose exhibits two fundamental problems, neither of which is interesting within the context of his personality. Both are compelling, however, when seen as reflections of our current cultural condition.

Rose's first problem is that he is constitutionally incapable of accepting the fact that two plus two equals four. He cannot absorb the principle of cause and effect. The effect with which he struggles is his banishment from Major League Baseball. The cause was his betting on Major League Baseball. The foundation of the circumstance that generates his misery is MLB's legendary Rule 21, the most famous commandment in all of sports: "Any player . . . who shall bet any sum whatsoever upon any baseball game in connection with which the bettor has a duty to perform shall be declared permanently ineligible." Rose broke that rule—with a vengeance, it turns out—and suffered the consequences. His response to

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